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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH ATT: MALI'S SECURITY
NEEDS IN AN ERA OF UNHELPFUL NEIGHBORS

Classified By: Ambassador Gillian A. Milovanovic, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador met with President Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT) on May 8 to inquire about Mali's plans for addressing northern security in a theoretical post-hostage situation future and his views of how the U.S. might best assist these efforts. ATT spoke of the dynamics surrounding the ongoing hostage crises, rejecting "financial transactions" to secure hostage releases, but nevertheless questioning the efficacy of "trapping oneself in useless principles." Referring to his oft-renewed attempts to hold a Sahel regional summit on security and counter-terrorism cooperation, ATT expressed disappointment at the continued unavailability of various regional leaders which suggested a lack of commitment on their part. He claimed to have largely resigned himself to the fact that Mali would have to address these problems alone despite them being clearly regional problems with regional solutions. He outlined a list, consistent with previous requests, of training, equipment, intelligence, and infrastructure requirements to increase Malian capacity and facilitate any such actions. What he outlined was capacity building over the medium term to re-establish the government's presence and authority in the North and reduce the freedom to maneuver of traffickers, criminal bands, and AQIM, rather than a near-term strategy to pursue AQIM. ATT welcomed news of a DOD/NASA plane to produce better maps of northern Mali. End summary.

The Troubled North - and No Help from the Neighbors

¶2. (C) Recalling earlier requests at various levels for help in being better able to view their own country as a first step to better exercise national control, particularly in Mali's undermapped north, the Ambassador shared recent news passed earlier to the Minister of Defense, that we had been able to secure the services of a NASA plane leased by the Department of Defense that will overfly Mali to produce maps that we can share with the GOM. ATT welcomed this news, and began a discussion of the still-fragile nature of Mali's northern zones. Calling the Tuareg rebellion distressing and continued stability uncertain given ever-present banditry and contraband flows, ATT wished aloud for rapid development projects to reassure people of better prospects. He lamented the continuing presence of terrorists, and his inability to organize regional cooperation among a group of neighbors who all viewed instilling better security as someone else's job.

¶3. (C) Reacting to recent vitriolic exchanges in Algerian and Malian media, he was particularly harsh on Algeria. He said the Algerians had taken neither responsibility for a problem that originated in Algeria nor action. For example, they had done nothing with information Mali had gleaned from the Canadian hostages' Nigerien chauffeur, despite possessing both the military means to do so and Malian permission for Algerian cross-border hot pursuit "even to Timbuktu." He concluded that while Mali would continue to talk to its

neighbors, Sahelian cooperation was not going to produce anything effective, so Mali needed to be able to act alone on its own behalf. Before turning to that list of requirements, he recalled that Mali had arrested four terrorists including a significant cache of materiel and computers. The detainees included AQIM's chief of operations in the zone. He observed that the composition of the group, including a Ghanaian in addition to the more expected one Algerian and two Mauritians, underscored the frighteningly expanding reach of AQIM in West Africa.

14. (C) ATT said that as Mali attempted to navigate the hostage situation the scope of the terrorism problem had become more apparent. A group that formerly numbered fewer than 30 now seemed closer to 100. He said he had warned Mali's neighbors that if they didn't act to solve this problem, "others would do it for us," another theme from his recent interview in Algerian media. He summarized Mali's needs as training, logistic support, equipment and intelligence. He linked these first three elements to the daunting vastness and harsh terrain of northern Mali, observing that Malian security forces could not succeed without the same mobility - and security - enjoyed by AQIM. This required not only training and equipment, including items such as adapted vehicles for the punishing desert environment, but the establishment/reinforcement of small strategic locations in the north from which Malian forces could patrol into the farther flung interior. He cited the need to set up a few small remote outposts and to rehabilitate the base and air field at Tessalit (including its 3000 meter runway) toward those ends. Currently, forces deployed in the north work only from 4 am to 10 am, forced by the lack of the most rudimentary shelter to spend sunlight hours in the shade of their vehicles.

15. (C) To illustrate his point about the difficulty of maneuvering successfully in these zones, ATT cited the struggle against the Tuareg rebel bandit Bahanga. The Malian armed forces had been unable to best him until they brought in irregulars used to, equipped for, and effective in the desert environment. ATT praised the importance of intelligence cooperation, and stressed that he had asked Mali's director for external security to share any and all information related to the four new detainees. The Ambassador thanked ATT for that information and cooperation, and recalled that there is an anti-terrorism judicial track in addition to the intelligence one. She noted that the FBI would like to have access to, or at least pose questions to, the four detainees in hopes that their information might bolster the legal case for U.S. indictments or extradition requests for specific AQIM members. ATT accepted this suggestion, without further comment on how such access would be facilitated. He was equally supportive but non-specific in response to the Ambassador's reference to her discussions with the Minister of Internal Security on beginning to develop police capacity.

How to Handle Hostages?

16. (C) Turning to the remaining hostages, ATT said that Mali was "not naive" about various parties' preferred strategies. Even as he said that Mali found it difficult to refuse a donor's request for assistance, he said that Mali opposed any financial exchange for hostages, a position the Ambassador said we strongly shared. The ambassador added that we hoped the four detainees would not wind up as... which ATT himself completed with the words "bargaining chips." ATT expanded on the hostage subject, saying he hoped to be in a situation to prevent the future taking of hostages, which put Mali and others in a situation of being trapped in "useless principles" while there were human concerns at stake. Military action was too risky, leaving the exchange of money or people. He expressed concern that the British hostage would be killed, calling the hostage takers crazed and eager to show off and prove their franchise's worth to central Al Qaeda figures. Meanwhile,

Mali would continue patrols and look into the information seized from the detainees to see what it contributed. The Ambassador stressed that although Mali's situation is quite complicated, the ceding of important principles will only embolden AQIM and incite others to take even more hostages in a rapidly developing cottage industry. Picking up her reference to the petty bandits who had facilitated the transfer of the four Europeans to AQIM, ATT said Mali had arrested some of them, and would prosecute them.

¶17. (C) As ATT again reiterated the cycle of Mali's needs for mapping, intelligence, training/logistics, and infrastructure, he drew a picture of a more medium than short term process. The Ambassador used this opportunity to discuss current training in connection with JCETs, highlighting that these exercises represent a substantial U.S. financial and personnel investment. A core of Malian military personnel needed to be made available for successive JCETS, subsequent exercises needed to again focus on those previously trained, and a means needed to be devised between engagements to keep skills honed as well as share acquired knowledge with other Malian elements. ATT agreed continuity was important, although he added that substitutions were sometimes inevitable as forces were deployed on maneuvers. He undertook to talk with the Minister of Defense to ensure the maximum reasonable number of Malian soldiers would be repeat participants.

¶18. (C) ATT's parting messages for the Ambassador were threefold. First, he greatly appreciates our training, which is very important to his largely young and inexperienced military. Second, Mali realizes it can no longer rely on its neighbors on counter-terrorism, and thus needs to improve its own forces and capacities with our help. Third, ATT renewed his expression of friendship with the U.S. He acknowledged the embarrassment of the ongoing hostage crises in Mali's north, and while he recognized the correctness of the principles governing these situations, he said he could not ignore the human dimension involved.

Comment

¶19. (C) ATT's basic list of requests for empowering Malian forces to better patrol the north is not new. This is not surprising since the needs remain unchanged and there has been no significant injection of equipment or tailored systematic training in response to these earlier requests. The list, including intelligence, vehicles, equipment, and physical reinforcement of northern outpost bases dates at least to mid-2007. We hope that our long-delayed delivery of vehicles, communications equipment, and physical barriers can be brought to fruition soon. While the Algiers Accords contain some reservations about increased militarization of the north, the scope of his proposed reinforcements is in fact within the boundaries of the agreement which calls for the refurbishment of airports in Tessalit, Gao, and Kidal and instructs Mali to relocate military bases away from urbanized areas. While we have seen ATT frustrated with Algeria and other neighbors before, the intensity of his reaction was new. Where ATT previously saw regional consultation as preceding concerted regional action, his plans now, if not necessarily in a short term, are more solitary.

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